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Darlene Hull
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Collecting in the Trade Winds: Experiences of a Caribbean Book Vendor

DARLENE HULL*

I must first say that I have been a book vendor for a relatively short time compared to my partner René Grullón. For 25 years prior I was an academic librarian. Hence, this paper is a collaborative effort with René who has been in the business of providing materials to university libraries for close to 15 years.

I want to start this paper with a quote from a 2001 publication, *A History of Literature in the Caribbean*, which will lay out the scene for the remainder and will speak to the question “Why do libraries use Vendors to supply publications, particularly from the developing world?”

The Caribbean Book Trade with few exceptions is still characterized by some or all of the following features: Decentralized production, with the initiative coming from institutions, individuals, bookshops and printers rather than from commercial publishers; small editions which soon go out-of-print; a high proportions of mimeographed and unpriced publications; limited distribution, [and] incomplete bibliographic control.

Keeping these characteristics in mind, let me present our experiences when searching for publications on one of our “book safaris” in the Dominican Republic. I will remind you that our experiences are very similar in Puerto Rico, except that we live in the country so we do not have to shrink everything into two-week trips.

* Darlene Hull completed her BA in Spanish at Bard College in 1979 after two years of study in Mexico. She earned her Master’s Degree in Information and Library Science from the University of Kentucky in 1982. She served as Curator of Hispanic history and Culture Collections and as Latin American and Caribbean Specialist Librarian at the University of Connecticut from 1982-2005. Ms. Hull joined Libros de Barlovento in 2005. She has been an active member of the organization, SALALM, since 1984 and served as the association’s president in 2002-2003.

In recent years, similar to what is happening in most Latin American, Caribbean and even European countries, more and more regional publications are appearing. While Santo Domingo remains the focus of publishing in the country, more publications are originating in Santiago, San Francisco de Macorís, La Vega, and La Romana, among other cities.

Additionally, in many Latin American & Caribbean countries, unlike in the United States, government publishers are often as important and/or relevant to academic collecting as commercial and university presses. In fact, in the Dominican Republic there are as many of these types of publishers as commercial publishers.

¹ However, the distribution of these publications is very limited, or does not exist in the manner that we associate with commercial publishers such as distribution to bookstores. Basically, we have to travel from one agency to another where they often do not even sell their publications, but only gift one to each person. In these cases we ask our taxi driver to come in to the office with us so we can at least receive three copies of an important publication. Of course, we face an equally difficult situation when we then receive 15 orders for the same title for which we only have three copies. We make every attempt to acquire more copies, but often we have very little luck.

Non-governmental organizations (NGOs), Foundations, and Museums (both government supported and private) are also extremely important publishers in the Dominican Republic, as well as in many Latin American & Caribbean countries.²

In the last 3-4 years another publishing phenomena has been occurring throughout Latin America. Various Spanish and Columbian mega-publishers have started to publish local authors in that specific country intended for the local market only. These books, while published by Santillana, Norma, or Alfaguara, do not circulate outside of the specific

¹ For example, the State Department for the Advancement of Women, the State Department for Culture (including the National Press and the BookFair imprint) the State Department for Foreign Relations, the Supreme Court, the Central Bank, the National Library, the National Archives, and others.

² For example, there are the Organization for Citizen Participation, the National Council for State Reform, Pro-Family, the Global Democracy and Development Foundation, the Juan Bosch Foundation, the Jesuit Center for Social Studies and Immigrant Support, the Dominican Academy for History, the Dominican Academy for Language, as well as many others.

country where they are produced. In other words, a novel published by Alfaguara Santo Domingo or Alfaguara, Puerto Rico, while carrying the Alfaguara tag, cannot be ordered through Alfaguara, Spain or Alfaguara, Mexico, the biggest of their distribution centers – they are not distributed there nor held in warehouses there. The book can only be found in Santo Domingo or San Juan. These publishers have segmented their business to take better advantage of local markets, particularly to secure contracts with the countries' Departments of Education.

The Santo Domingo Book Fair is a very important event for us in our attempts to secure all relevant publications for our library clients' needs. The Book Fair brings together in one place not only major publishers and the big bookstores, but also government agencies, NGOs, regional publishers, Foundations, and the like. We work every day in the Fair for two weeks trying to gather all the materials we need.

One must keep in mind that the Santo Domingo Book Fair is nothing like the Guadalajara Book Fair. First, it is in the open air, in May – a very hot time of year to be in the Caribbean. It does not have a well greased structure like the Guadalajara Book Fair, hence there are no places for you to check email or client online catalogs, there are no centralized mailing services for librarians, or other services of that variety. We usually hire a young man to accompany us as we travel from booth to booth gathering materials and then will call our taxi driver to meet us at a strategic point on the street outside the Fair (since they do not let taxi drivers enter the Fair) to take back to our hotel what we have gathered to that point.

As many agencies and publishers continue to bring books and other publications throughout the two weeks of the Fair, we will need to return to the same booths over and over to assure we have acquired all relevant publications in the number of copies that we need to fulfill our clients' approval plan requirements and other clients' firm orders. At the same time, not all publishing entities come to the BookFair so during that trip to the Dominican Republic, as well as on all other buying trips that we make there, we need to visit many other locations, including the private Museums such as the Centro Leon Jimenes in Santiago de los Caballeros, the mountain city in the north of the country; or the Museum Garcia Arévalo, housed over the owner's 7-UP bottling plant, and the private Museum Bellapart, located over the owner's Honda Car Dealership.

Legal Materials

Shifting to a focus on legal publications, much of what I have prefaced involving general materials applies to the hunt for legal materials as well. This includes the difficulties of identifying and acquiring regional publications, publications from NGOs, foundations and institutions, as well as the usual government agencies and commercial publishers, of course.

The Santo Domingo Book Fair is also very important for the acquisition of legal materials – as many of the NGOs and governmental agencies involved in activities related to law reform or the practice of law, for example, have a booth at the Fair to promote their activities and to sell their publications. It is there that we most successfully acquire publications from CONARE (the National Council on State Reform), the Commission for Constitutional Reform, the Customs Department, Aduana, FINJUS, the Foundation for Institutionalism and Justice, the Electoral Commission, the Department of Labor, Participación Ciudadana or Citizen Participation, and many others.

As with the hunt for materials on the history, politics, culture and literature of the Dominican Republic the hunt for legal materials goes beyond what can be acquired at the Book Fair. Visiting legal bookstores, government agencies, NGOs and the like are necessary and repeated stops for all of our trips to the Dominican Republic.

In the Dominican Republic the laws are changed or modified often so that in each trip we take to the D.R. there are many new or revised editions to purchase to keep our clients' collections up-to-date. Many of these volumes we can find at legal bookstores. Some of the important commercial publishers include:

- Ediciones,
- Jurídicas Trajano Potentini,
- Librería Jurídica Internacional,
- Editora Centenario,
- the University Press,
- Gaceta Judicial, and
- Eidtora Dalis.

Several well-known lawyers and law firms publish essential materials. These include Almanzar Canahuat González, Jorge A. Suvero Isa, Eduardo Jorge Prat, William C. Headrick, and Pellerano & Herrera.

However, we also need to visit the Supreme Court foremost to secure the “Court Reporter” for several clients who have subscriptions, as well as to secure other legal materials published by and distributed by the Supreme Court.

An anecdote you might enjoy involves the first time I visited the Supreme Court with my partner René. As we passed through the metal detector I was motioned aside where a woman indicated that I was inappropriately dressed. I always wear a skirt and blouse while traveling in the Dominican Republic – that is my style and it is also a professional manner of working, respectful of Caribbean culture. I could not think what was wrong. Then she said “desmanga” which means I had bare arms, a sleeveless shirt. So I pulled my shawl out of my bag, wrapped it around my shoulders and I was on my way into the court building. I quickly learned to always carry that shawl or a jacket for the times we are headed to government agencies such as the Court, the Central Bank and others.

Another experience involves the first time we finally found the locale where the *Gaceta Oficial* is kept. It was very interesting. So we go there each trip to gather all newly released issues of the *Gaceta Oficial* or the Congressional Record, which are housed in a government warehouse garage, also used to store broken down government vehicles.

Of course an important part of our buying trips to the Dominican Republic includes packing. All the books, journals, government documents, newspapers and other materials that we collect need to be packed and prepared for shipment back to our offices in Puerto Rico (both the physical preparation as well as the necessary paperwork for Customs). Once the shipment arrives in Puerto Rico we then unpack all the boxes in order to redistribute the materials to the appropriate approval plan clients or firm order clients. The new titles that were acquired on the trip are entered into our next promotional catalog workflow – we produce 2 catalogs of new titles for each country, each year.

We follow a similar pattern for acquiring Puerto Rican materials except that we are in the country – and it is a fairly small country – so some of the tasks described for trips to the Dominican Republic do not apply, although most do. Similarly, in Puerto Rico we keep abreast of what is being published by commercial publishers such as Ediciones Situm, Ediciones Lorena the publishing house of Ponce lawyer Pedro Malavet Vega, LexisNexis of Puerto Rico as well as by important figures in the legal field, including José Trias Monge. There are several legal journals in Puerto Rico that we serve via

subscriptions to clients. These include the *Revista Jurídica de la Universidad de Puerto Rico*, our hosts for this conference, *Revista Jurídica de la Universidad Interamericana*, *Revista del Colegio de Abogados* or the “Bar Association” and *Ley y Foro*, also from the Colegio de Abogados.

For both countries that we cover and for all materials that we offer, one of our most important responsibilities for best serving our clients is to keep abreast of developments in the book trade, literary trends and current events in Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. This includes maintaining a solid knowledge of each country’s history, politics, literature and culture.